

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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My preaching professor would tell us over and over that the job of a preacher is to “say one true thing about God, and then sit down.” Sometimes you read a passage and think of two or three or twelve true things you could say about God, but pare it down, the reading will be back again within three years, you can use some of those other ideas then. One true thing about God and then sit down.

And I struggled, a lot, to keep that advice this week. Today we’re celebrating the apostle Mary Magdalene’s feast day and she is just *so* neat and I am a *huge* fan and I could gush about her forever and ever. Mary Magdalene: the woman whose name appears more frequently than any other in the New Testament—yes even more than Mary Mother of Our Lord. Mary Magdalene: the woman Jesus healed of seven demons (a likely indication that she had some kind of physical and/or psychological disability), but then instead of skipping off back to her life before, like so many others that Jesus healed would do, Mary stuck around. He healed her and from that moment onward she was all in, following her Lord to the bitter end and then some. The gospel writers all agree that the Eleven abandoned Jesus that night in the garden, and they all also assert that Mary didn’t. We see her at the cross, watching on from a distance, following his body to the tomb, witnessing the stone get rolled into place. Because not even death itself could stop her from following her teacher.

Luke asserts that she, along with Joanna and Susanna and other unnamed women are the ones who financially supported Jesus’ ministries. There would have been

no Jesus movement without these women there to fund it. And on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene, (and likely Mary of Clopas, Joanna, Salome, and other women who the gospel writers didn't bother to name), but definitely for sure the Magdalene stood in witness to the empty tomb and saw the risen Christ. And that action was not without risk! Matthew in particular asserts that Pilate had armed guards stationed outside the tomb! And that while the eleven went into hiding out of fear for their lives, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Clopas stationed themselves opposite the tomb, staring down the soldiers. Not even the threat of her own death would stop her.

The Great Commission, the instructions Jesus gave the 11 after his resurrection, comes up a lot in church—"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And today John tells us that on Easter morning, Jesus gave Mary her own commission, "go to my siblings and tell them I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and to your God." John says that, for a time, the apostle Mary was the *entire* church only one who knew the Good News of the resurrection, the very first to evangelize. And sometimes I find myself wondering how the course of Christian history and theology would have panned out if this First Commission had been the one we dubbed "Great" instead. Would the refrain of "my Father and your Father" beating in our hearts have steered us away from holy wars and religious persecution and colonization? Would it have fostered in us a greater push towards mutual aid and care for one another as siblings? Or would humanity ultimately have mucked that one up too? I don't have an answer for you, but I

think it's worth pondering what the church today might be like if from its inception we had looked to Mary as a role model.

Because the fact of the matter is, we *didn't* look to her as a positive role model. She did all of these things for the early church, we are here because of her testimony because of her faithfulness, because of her unwillingness to give up and lie down under the crushing weight of injustice and the fierceness in which she pulled the people up around her and gave them the strength to keep going too. Mary gave everything she had to the Jesus movement. And how did we repay her?

We confused her with other women in the Bible, erroneously declared her a sex worker, and mocked her as a fool. And I want to be very clear here, I am not condemning sex workers, neither do I think Mary would have, Jesus was friends with sex workers, she would have been too! She just...wasn't one herself. "But then why did I hear..." Well once upon a time, Pope Gregory I was giving an Easter sermon. And he messed up, and that error he made in the year 591 still hangs over us over fourteen hundred years later. See, the name Miriam, (which in Greek and Latin gets rendered as "Mary") was an *extremely* popular name for women during Jesus' time. To the extent that historians estimate that one out of every four Judean women were named Miriam. And so Jesus spent time with a *lot* of different people with that name. But in his easter sermon, Pope Gregory claimed Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany were two names for the same person (Mary of Bethany is Martha and Lazarus' sister), and biblical scholars still can't make up their minds on if he was right or not. But whether he was or not, the Pope then went on to say something that was *entirely* wrong. He claimed that this

Mary Magdalene of Bethany was *also* the unnamed “sinful woman” who appears earlier on in the gospel of Luke who silently sobbed as she washed Jesus’ feet as an act of repentance. But Mary and that unnamed woman aren’t the same people. The only connection between the two is that they’re both women and Luke tells their stories back to back. But then the pope went one step further in that sermon, he claimed that the unnamed repentant sinner was a sex worker. There isn’t even a hint of that in the story. Jesus says “her many sins have been forgiven” but makes no move to reveal what those many sins were. But she’s a woman and she sinned so surely it must be related to sex, right?

And so, beginning in the late 500’s the church began to tell a tale of this Mary Magdalene of Bethany, a former sex worker who was perpetually repentant for her sins and trying to make up for her past failings. And that is how Mary Magdalene came to be the patron saint of sexual temptation, penitent sinners, and sex workers. She’s the patron of many other things too--women, people ridiculed for their piety, converts, and perfumers to name a few. But sex workers, she didn’t become their patron until the 500’s, but I don’t think that makes her any less for them. Mary was fiercely loyal and showed up for her people. If a friend needed her not even swords and clubs could keep her away. And so while she probably *shouldn’t* have been made the patron saint of sex workers in the first place, good luck trying to take them back from her.

But I think what frustrates me the most of the way church history treated Mary is the way we painted her as a fool. We see this story in John of Mary in the garden and how she didn’t recognize Jesus at first and we mocked her for it! “How’s she following Jesus around all this time and doesn’t even know what he looks like?”

“heh heh, attention to detail must not be her strong suit, huh?” And while we do that, we ignore that scripture *clearly* gives us an explanation for her confusion. Mary was weeping. Her teacher was brutally lynched by the state and now to add insult to injury, someone appears to have stolen his body. Imagine for a moment that you had buried a loved one and then when you came back two days later to visit their grave, you found a gaping hole in the ground, the coffin open, and no body to be seen. How would you respond to that? I know if it were me, that would *break* me. I am in awe of how coherent Mary remains in this situation, though it is clear she’s not operating at her full capacity. She answers the angels’ question, but doesn’t ask who they are or why they’re there. She continues to sob as she turns away, and truly who can see well when they’re sobbing? And then church we get so distracted judging her for thinking Jesus is the gardener (a fair assumption for her to make! Especially if she’s doubled over crying and only sees his feet!) that we overlook the loving faithfulness in her response. “If you’ve carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

It has been three days since Jesus died, enough time for rigor mortis to have ended and bloating to begin, making the body bigger than it would have been in life. There would likely be bugs, and even with everything they’d anointed him with, it would smell, and it would have been...soft and likely leaking fluids. Mary is by herself, she has brought no wagon with her, so she means to carry him herself. It is likely that Jesus was at least slightly larger than her, but even if she was taller or broader than him, I don’t know many people that can easily carry what 80 or 90% of their own body weight for a long distance.

But still that is her first thought. If his body's presence here offends you, give him to me, I will cradle his mushy decomposing corpse in my arms the best I can, and I'll stagger off and find somewhere else to lay him. That she never ended up needing to do that does not negate the fact that she would have. And I see Jesus responding to her, heart breaking, overflowing with love and sorrow and pride but also joy at how very happy he's going to make her in just a second. "Oh Mary! You would go to the ends of the earth for me, wouldn't you, my steadfast one." And she would, and in some ways she did.

As you can see, we have red paraments up. We put red up on days associated with the Holy Spirit, major church reformers, and on the feast days of martyrs. If they aren't a martyr, the saint gets white. But sometimes we aren't sure how a saint died. We have to rely on folk tales and those tales can vary quite a lot. The apostle Matthew is one such example, he died in Ethiopia either peacefully when he was old *or* he died a martyr's death and was staked to the ground. We still give him red on his feast day though, because while we aren't sure, the church decided it kind of makes sense to default to martyr status, just to be safe. Tradition says Mary died in Ephesus, where she had accompanied St John on his missionary work, some say she was martyred alongside many other early Christian converts, and some say she died of old age. So naturally with all of that in mind...the church says the color for today is white. Because while we aren't sure how she died the church decided it kind of made sense to default to non-martyr status...just to be safe. (But I say to you, what better way to celebrate Mary Magdalene & channel her energy than disregarding a...flawed decree?)

Because the church looked at Mary, the woman who played an essential role in *forming* the church. Who at one point made up 100% of all believers of the good news. The one who was filled with that Holy Spirit fire as she ran to tell the other disciples what she had seen in the garden. Who left her home and people behind and traveled to modern day Turkey spreading the gospel. Who some accounts say willingly chose the sword rather than forsaking her lord, and died a martyr's death. And said white for her.

Which I suppose goes in keeping with the whole theme we cultivated for Mary throughout history. Did you know there's a sort of hierarchy to feast days? At the bottom you have commemorations (some traditions call these memorials), then there's feasts, and finally high feasts. The eleven all have that middle level of feast, and they've enjoyed those for over a thousand years. But what did we give Mary Magdalene? The one we named Apostle to the Apostles and Equal to the Apostles? She got a commemoration, the recognition granted to saints of "lesser or regional importance" It wasn't until 2016 that hers *finally* got elevated to the status of feast. And yet we had the *audacity* to call her equal to the apostles, even as we snubbed her.

The Apostle Mary Magdalene dedicated her whole life to the gospel. She talked the talk yes, but she walked the walk too, showing up again and again for her friends, and when it looked like defeat was before them, she and the other female apostles were there holding them together, writing the checks, showing the boys how it's done, defiantly marching onwards. And in return, we distorted her image to the point where it's hard to make her out.

Today Mary Magdalene stands as a reminder that that might happen to us all too. Both in the short term and the long. That people might despise us and say disparaging things about us, both on an individual level and this community collectively. We might be painted misguided fools. Told we got scripture all wrong, and we should be punished for it. That our pride flags outside are an affront to God and should be torn down. That our commitments to the work of anti-racism are to be condemned. That we are mistaken and God's love does in fact have boundary lines. But today we look at the apostle Mary, and how for nearly two thousand years, the church got her story wrong, and is only recently starting to correct it. And in that time she too was painted a fool and criticized for things she didn't even do. And so we rejoice, knowing that we are in good company, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before us. Prophets like the apostle Mary.

And we remember that, even as the church got her story all wrong, God never did. God knew exactly what was in her heart. And while we have forgotten all the sacrifices and loving acts she did in her gospel work, God saw them all. And whether she died a martyr or not God was there beside her, Jesus giving her that same look of adoring sorrow-pride-joy that he bestowed on her that first Easter morning, the Holy Spirit pumping through her even as she took her final breaths. God never forgot her, not even for a moment. And those things that hold true for the apostle Mary hold true for us too. History may forget us, or be unkind to us, distort our stories, assign us motivations that we never had. But God never will. God knows exactly who you are, and sees even the smallest steps you take in spreading this gospel of love, and is *so proud of you*. No if ands or buts.



And as you can see, while we did take the scenic route, I finally got around to saying my one true thing about God. So I suppose it's time for me to sit!